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THE WASTE OF PRIVATE HOUSEKEEPING

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The principal waste in our "domestic economy" lies in the fact that it is domestic.

Domestic industry is the earliest form of labor. Its original type is mother-service, to which was soon added wife-service and slave-service, often embodied in the same person. This primitive labor type increased in numbers where more than one slave, or wife, or slave-wife was possessed, and was slightly raised in grade as slave labor became serf labor, and that gradually turned to contract labor in a modified form.

The domestic servant is still expected to take part wage in barter, food and shelter being given instead of the full price in money; to live in the house of the employing family, to show the virtues of the earlier status, humility, loyalty, faithfulness, and, as belonging to that earlier status, no high degree of skill is expected.

Where no servants are employed, which in our country is the case in fifteen families out of sixteen, domestic industry is still at its first stage, mother-service. As such it is not regarded as labor, in any economic sense, but as a sex-function proper to the woman. She is expected to do the work because she is a woman, without any regard to special fitness or experience, this view being frequently expressed in the words "every girl should know how to cook," while no single trade is ever so mentioned as necessary to every boy.

Industrial efficiency grows along lines of specialization, organization and interchange. In the stage of industrial evolution when each man provided for himself by his own unaided exertions we find the maximum of effort with the minimum of product.

Domestic industry is the only survival of that stage in our otherwise highly differentiated economic system. While every woman is expected to follow one trade the grade of efficiency must remain at the lowest possible average.

The servant is but a shade higher in specialization, and this advantage is nullified by two conditions: first, that owing to its status few persons are willing to perform this service except those incompetent for more highly evolved duties; and second, that owing to the natural tendency of women to marry, the grade of domestic service is that of a perpetual apprenticeship.

Neither the labor of the overworked average mother, nor the labor of the perpetual low-grade apprentice, can ever reach high efficiency. This element of waste is inherent in domestic industry and cannot be overcome. No special training can be applied to every girl and produce good results in all; no psychological gymnastics can elevate housework when housework, in economic status, is at the very bottom of industrial evolution.

This is the first element of waste in domestic industry—permanent inefficiency. The second is in the amount of labor required.

While each man, however poor, requires one whole woman to cook for him, we have a condition in which half the people of the world are engaged in house-service.

Today some seven million women in the United States are working at gainful occupations, but several million of these are employed as house-servants, and the general division of labor is that women as a whole, 50 per cent of the world's workers, are in domestic industry.

The waste here is between this proportion and the proportion such work really requires, which is about 10 per cent. For fifty women to spend all their time doing what ten women could do in the same, or even less time, is a waste of 40 per cent of the world's labor.

Estimating the present market value of women's labor at char-woman's wages, \$1.50 a day, and assuming that we have 15,000,000 working housewives, their labor is worth, per year, some \$7,500,000,000. One-fifth of them could do the work at a cost of \$1,500,000,000, making an annual saving of \$6,000,000,000, about \$300 per family. This element of waste has not been considered because we are not accustomed to consider women's work as having any cash value. Our lack of perception does not however alter the economic facts. While wasting, in house-service, 40 per cent of the productive industry of the woman world, we thus lose not only by the low average of capacity here stated, but all the higher potentiality of many women for the more valuable forms of world-service. In this connection no one should be allowed to claim that house-service is in itself noble, high,

supremely valuable, while at the same time willing to leave its performance to the lowest grade of labor in the world.

The third element of waste in domestic industry is in the repetition of plant.

Under this head we will group the building expense involved in attaching a kitchen and laundry to every house (the smaller the house the greater the proportion of space given to this purpose; if but one room it must serve as the workshop), the furnishing of each kitchen with its stove, tubs, boilers, sink, and all the dishes, iron-ware, and utensils appurtenant, and the further supplying of each kitchen with water, light and fuel; also the amounts due for breakage and depreciation.

No definite figures can be given in estimates based on such widely varying conditions as those here considered, but it is shown from ample experience that one properly constituted kitchen can provide food for five hundred people, equal to one hundred families, and with space, fittings and supplies certainly not exceeding those of ten private kitchens.

A waste of 90 per cent is a conservative estimate here. If this seems too great we should hold in mind not only the reduction in original expense, between building one large kitchen and a hundred small ones, between the one outfit and the hundred in boilers, tubs, sinks, ranges, tables, refrigerators, pantrys, cupboards, etc., and not only the difference in the amount of fuel and other supplies needed, but the difference in the bills for breakage and repairs. Ten skilled experts, working under the proper conditions with proper tools, are not so expensive as a hundred clumsy beginners in a hundred necessarily imperfect average kitchens.

Beyond this comes the fourth great element of waste in domestic industry—that involved in the last and least extreme of retail purchasing.

Our economists should establish for us the difference between the “cost” and the “price” of living; what it really costs to raise and deliver our food, and what we are charged for it.

Here again the field of study is too wide, too varying in conditions, for exact tabulation in figures, but the amount wasted may be roughly suggested by the difference between apples by the barrel at \$3, and apples by the quart at 15 cents, or \$12 a barrel—a waste of three-fourths.

In some commodities it is higher than this, in others much lower; but it is more than safe to say that we expend full twice as much as we need to for our food, by our small private purchasing. The poorer the purchaser the higher the price and the lower the value obtained.

We must remember that the high cost of living is not only in what we pay, but in what we buy; we are taxed not merely in the increased price, but in the decreased value. Ten cents a quart for good milk is high price. Ten cents a quart for a medicated, half-cooked, repulsive white fluid that does not sour but reeks instead, is a higher price.

We are striving in many ways, from federal laws to local inspection, to improve the quality of our food supplies, but no one seems to see that the one permanent continuing cause of poor food is the helplessness of the private purchaser.

The working housewife is not only the cook but the purchaser of food. She has little time and less money, and almost no knowledge. She has no machinery for testing the products offered her, no time to search widely, no cash to pay for the better grades. She must buy and buy quickly, close at home—for the baby is heavy to carry or left to uncertain risks.

Even if, by some gross miracle, all these millions of poor women could be taught to know bad food, that would not give them the means to pay for the good.

We have, of course, our Housewives' League, doing excellent work, but remember that the women who keep servants are but one-sixteenth of the whole; fifteen-sixteenths of our families are poor. This condition of ignorance and financial helplessness is what enables the bad food products to be kept on the market.

Now look at the difference in purchasing power when one skilled experienced buyer orders, at wholesale, for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of customers. Such a person would have the special knowledge and wide experience to recognize the best, and the power to demand it. No one condition would more promptly raise the standard of our food supply than this knowledge and power in the purchaser.

It is of no use to urge that "all women should be so trained." You could not make a skilled "tea-taster" of all men, nor a skilled caterer of all women. Specialization is necessary to develop skill. The domestic worker, wife, or servant, is eternally unspecialized.

This study is one of criticism, devoted to pointing out the wastes in our system of living, and to showing that they are inherent in that

system. It is not possible at the same time and in the same space to present a convincing revelation as to how we might live otherwise. This much, however, may be stated: that the specialization of those industries now lumped together as "domestic" will no more injure "the privacy of the home," the "sanctity of the family," than has the specialization of the spinning-wheel. Neither maid nor matron may be now assailed with, "Go spin, you jade, go spin!" They do not spin—yet the home and family endure. This trade was once considered so wholly, so essentially a "feminine function" that we still have the term "spinster" to prove it. Similarly we might call a woman "a cookster" long after she had ceased to cook. But the integrity of the family, the happiness and wholesomeness of home life, are no more dependent on the private cook-stove than they were on the private spinning-wheel.

To conclude our list of wastes we ought to indicate a little of the waste of human life involved in this process, the waste of health, of energy, of the growing power of the world.

While the women waste four-fifths of their labor on this department of work, the men must make up by extra earnings. They are saddled with this extravagant and inefficient low-grade private industry, must pay its expenses and suffer from its deficiencies.

Our general food habits, and standard of health in the alimentary processes, are not such as to justify the dragging anachronism of domestic industry. If the world were kept healthy, happy, and well-fed, we might be willing to do it wastefully, but such is by no means the case.

The professionalization of cooking, cleaning and laundry work should be hailed not only by the economist but by the hygienist, the eugenicist, and the social psychologist as a long upward step in world progress.

For the specific purposes of this paper it is enough to show that of all waste and extravagance in the cost of living none can equal this universal condition in which we waste four-fifths of the world's labor, more than half of our living expenses, and call it "domestic economy."